SCF grads celebrate a job well done
By LAURA C. MOREL
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BRADENTON -- Ileisy Lobaina remembers playing doctor while growing up in Holguin, Cuba.

She and her parents immigrated to the United States seven years ago. While adapting to a new language and culture, Lobaina's 5-year-old cousin died of heart problems in Cuba.

On Saturday, Lobaina, who has a 4.0 GPA, was one step closer to reaching her dream of becoming a cardiologist.

She was among 801 students graduating from the State College of Florida this year, 279 of which walked the stage to receive their diplomas during two commencement ceremonies Saturday.

"I'm so proud," Lobaina, of Sarasota, said inside SCF's Neel Performing Arts Center at 5840 26th St. W. "I'm really enjoying it."

The graduates, dressed in navy blue robes, filed onto the center's stage one by one as the crowd of loved ones snapped photos and recorded video.

Associate in arts and science degrees, as well as associate in science and bachelor of science in nursing degrees, were awarded.

Nearly 44,000 students have graduated from the State College of Florida during its 55 years.

"I invite you to take a good look at our graduates," said State College of Florida president Dr. Lars A. Hafner at commencement. "Each and every one of you have a unique story and achievement."

Among those students was Amanda Peebles, of Bradenton, who completed the dual enrollment program, getting a college degree before graduating high school. Her Braden River High School graduation is scheduled for May 31.

"It's finally here," Peebles said. "To me, it's a big accomplishment to graduate with an [associate in arts] degree at 17."

Alyson Smith graduated Saturday with her associate in science degree in dental hygiene. She enrolled at State College of Florida "many, many years ago," she explained with a smile.

But she dropped out for several years when "life kind of happened."

Smith had financial problems. She got married, had children and then separated from her husband.
But in 2010, she returned to college. On Saturday, her husband -- they have gotten back together -- and two kids cheered her on as she graduated with honors.

"Twelve years later, I finally did it," she said. "I think I floated across the stage."

Hafner announced the Outstanding Graduate Award recipient, awarded to a student every year. It comes with a $1,500 scholarship from the State College of Florida Foundation and a plaque.

Jacqueline MacPherson, who graduated with an associate in science degree in dental hygiene, won the award.

MacPherson, of Venice, is a member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and was a student delegate for the college’s Student American Dental Hygienists’ Association.

"It was amazing," she said after walking the stage during the 10 a.m. ceremony. "All the hard work came to that one moment."

The commencement speaker was Randall W. Hanna, chancellor of the Florida College System.

"Thank you for allowing me to share this special time with you," Hanna told the graduates.

He told the audience that when he informed his wife he would be speaking at the SCF graduation, his wife asked him, "Do you remember the name of your commencement speaker?"

Hanna admitted he didn't.

"So today, I won’t leave with any illusions that you will remember who spoke at your graduation ceremony," Hanna said.

Hanna shared some words of advice.

"It's just some things that I think are important as you move to the next phase of your life."

Hanna told the graduates to remember who helped them to succeed, say thank you often and to keep a balance between work and their personal lives.

"Play as hard as you work," Hanna said. "Being able to balance life and work is a skill that will pay dividends."

Lobaina sat in the front row during the commencement ceremony. She plans to attend University of South Florida in St. Petersburg and will major in biology and will spend the summer studying for the MCAT.

"My ultimate goal is to be a doctor," she said, smiling.
State College of Florida graduates make their way to the Neel Performing Arts Center for Spring Commencement Exercises Saturday morning at SCF. PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton
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